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Sex education in Washington – How local school districts and parents were locked out

By Sen. Val Stevens

This year in Olympia, parents were sold out. The Democrat supermajority ramrodded a bill through the Legislature that takes complete control over what their children are taught about sex. Parents will have no say in the matter. No school board meeting to voice their opinion and no forewarning.

Starting with the fourth grade, the State Department of Health and the Superintendent of Public Instruction have been instructed to write the curriculum that will include information about both homosexual and heterosexual sex and contraception. It is scheduled to be ready and coming to their child's school by September of 2008.

The end of local control

Until now, Washington's local school boards and parents have decided on all K-12 curricula. That ends with Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5297, which takes control of sex education materials away from parents, teachers and school boards, and gives it to unelected bureaucrats in the Department of Health.

That's right. The Department of Health and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction will create a sex education curriculum for Washington's children, and neither parents nor school districts have a say in it.

A survey by Zogby International asked the parents of 10- to-16-year-olds what they wanted in sex education for their children. At first, almost 50 percent of the parents said they wanted their children have comprehensive sex education and about 40 percent preferred abstinence education. Then participants were shown examples of "typical" comprehensive programs and "typical" abstinence programs. When asked again, only about 30 percent of the parents wanted comprehensive education and more than 61 percent preferred the abstinence curriculum.

Abstinence as an afterthought

As you may know, Washington has many extremely successful abstinence-based programs that have succeeded in keeping our kids safe. But ESSB 5297 will no longer allow schools to simply teach abstinence. Instead, schools must teach the Department of Health's sophisticated sex education curriculum or teach no sex education at all. It's Olympia's version of, "our way or the highway." This is one more frightening example of government reaching too far into the lives of our citizens.

The new law will allow abstinence to be taught, but only if it is just one part of the overall sex education curriculum. The definition of "abstinence" in these courses may not be what you think it is. For example, it may offer "alternatives" to sex that some would consider not to be abstinence at all. It must also be taught by an approved instructor – likely not the instructors teaching our most successful abstinence programs.

Both Senate and House Republicans tried to save our successful abstinence programs by introducing an amendment that would allow abstinence to be taught separately – in an attempt to give it equal weight. It was voted down. We asked that parents be able to see the curriculum in advance, to easily opt out of the program, and that local school boards have a say in what's taught in their community. All were voted down.

What can parents do?

Not a lot. According to the legislation, parents will not be advised of the sex education classes or invited to review the curriculum. They can see the curriculum, but only if they find out about it and insist upon seeing it. Parents can't change the curriculum, but can have their children opt out of the sex education classes, although the request must be presented to the school in writing. How many parents will know about this in time to protect their child's innocence?

If Olympia can now call the shots on your child's sex education curriculum (starting in the fourth grade), it's only a matter of time until there is no local control and you have no say over reading, writing, English, history, science and math curricula.

When the school year begins in September, I recommend parents who are concerned about this issue write a letter opting their child out of all sex ed classes. There's nothing good to be gained by the "wait and see" approach because you may never know or hear what your child is being taught. The letter should be addressed to the teacher with copies sent to the principal and superintendent.